

THE CHANGING DIRECTION OF SOUTHWIDE BAPTIST FELLOWSHIP

September 18, 2002 (David Cloud, Fundamental Baptist Information Service, P.O. Box 610368, Port Huron, MI 48061, 866-295-4143, fbns@wayoflife.org; for instructions about subscribing and unsubscribing or changing addresses, see the information paragraph at the end of the article) –

The August 30 issue of the *Sword of the Lord* contained a report by Editor Shelton Smith on the compromised direction of Southwide Baptist Fellowship. The article is titled “Southwide Slants Its Slate of Speakers.”

Smith observes that when he was the moderator of the Southwide annual meeting in 1994, he felt as though he “had been thrown into a war zone” because of the battle that raged over the type of speakers that would be invited. He said he “took considerable heat” for requiring that “the eleven speakers must all be solidly fundamentalist, separatist men.”

He goes on to say, “During the last five years there has been a growing aura of concern about what some of us perceived as a definite drift in the direction of the Southwide. ... when the roster of speakers for the October 2002 annual Southwide meeting was made public in mid-July, our fears appeared more than justified! Listed among the speakers were two Southern Baptist men, two or three independent Baptist men whose ministries are openly contemporary, and one other man who is a representative of an organization that could not be described as fundamentalist.” [The Southern Baptists are John Phillips and Bill Stafford.] Other speakers, such as Ralph Sexton, Bradley Price and Gary Coleman have worked in ministry with Southern Baptists/NEs (e.g., Jerry Falwell). Joe Jordan is with Word of Life -- *Calvary Contender*.]

He explains that the Southwide Fellowship was founded by men who separated from the Southern Baptist Convention and that despite the conservative resurgence in the SBC, “there is much--yea, exceedingly so--about the Convention for which we cannot give commendation and, consequently, much which sustains us in our resolve to be independent.” Indeed, this is true.

Smith also warns about “the Saddleback and/or Hybels philosophy” and organizations “like Word of Life, which is not a fundamentalist, separatist group.”

He also relates that he contacted current Southwide Fellowship leaders Gordon Godfrey (Marcus Pointe Baptist Church in Pensacola, Florida), Gary Coleman (Lavon Drive Baptist Church in Garland, Texas), and David Boulter (Highland Park Baptist Church, Chattanooga, Tennessee), to share his concerns. They did not agree with him.

I am very glad that Bro. Smith has been willing to speak out on this matter. I agree with the following statement:

“This whole current scenario at Southwide is no longer merely a matter of drift or an isolated case; it is now, in my judgment, a deliberate and pondered course. Some will no doubt think me harsh and judge me to be divisive or otherwise ill advised for speaking up. To the contrary, I cannot imagine myself, or any other fundamental preacher, for that matter, sitting quietly by while a major national fundamentalist institution is led off into left field by its leadership!”

The fact is that most preachers who claim to be fundamentalists are indeed standing by quietly (at least as far as their public statements) as compromise runs rampant in fundamentalist organizations and circles.

While I applaud Dr. Smith for saying what he did, I cannot agree that this is a completely new direction. I have had knowledge of Southwide since my days at Temple from 1974-1977, and it was not strong then. There were a number of SBC speakers at Highland Park Baptist Church even in the 1970s. Prominent New Evangelical leader Warren Wiersbe was a regular speaker even then.

Also, in my estimation the problem is much deeper than merely having some weak speakers. Southwide overall has always been shallow biblically, too man centered, seemingly more motivated by pragmatism (what will build a big church) than simple obedience to the Word of God, and extremely weak on repentance. If even a fourth of those reported as “saved” by the churches associated with Southwide had truly been saved, America would be a spiritual powerhouse for the Lord. Instead, a large percentage of these “converts” were given a quick and shallow presentation of the gospel, led in an empty sinner’s prayer muttered from an unrepentant heart, then given a false promise of assurance. Literally multitudes thus have become almost inoculated to genuine Holy Spirit regeneration. When someone tries to deal with such people about their souls, they say, “I’ve done that.” End of conversation. Yes, they’ve “done that,” but they haven’t been saved and their complete disregard for the things of Christ is the evidence. I believe “quick prayerism” is the most damnable error among fundamental Baptists.

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